

# Balboa Park needs new focus, study says

---

## Management shift proposed to operate city's crown jewel

**By Jeanette Steele**  
STAFF WRITER

January 30, 2008

Balboa Park is a “powder keg” of unaddressed maintenance issues because of scarce funding and unclear management, according to an independent report released today.

The report argues that it makes no sense for the nationally renowned destination to be run as one of 300-plus properties in San Diego's park system, and suggests that mounting problems can be solved only by new management focused on the task.

“Unfortunately, while numerous people and institutions are interested in assuring that Balboa Park can help *them* be successful, there is no official body with the focus on Balboa Park and the authority to help the park *itself* be successful,” said the report, which was funded by three nonprofit groups.

The solution may be a radical change in the way the city's signature park is run: a joint-powers authority with San Diego County and other cities; a new park district fueled by additional property taxes; or a nonprofit conservancy similar to the one that operates New York's Central Park.

Taking the long view, this is just another study suggesting changes for the park. In 2003, a state grant paid for a comprehensive land-use study that now sits on a shelf while its proposals await funding. This time, the city's financial crisis may be the catalyst that prompts action.

What's at stake is one of the city's most powerful tourist draws. Home to the San Diego Zoo and the Old Globe Theatre, Balboa Park attracts 10 million visitors a year.

For San Diegans, it's a 1,200-acre opportunity to hear free concerts, rotate into a volleyball game, see acacias in bloom, hike, run, swim or just enjoy a seat on the grass.

Though beloved by many, the park is crumbling, the report says. The study, which also surveyed nearly 2,800 park users about their experiences, was prepared by the Trust for

- [Governing the park](#)



File photo / Union-Tribune  
The Botanical Building and Lily Pond are among Balboa Park's signature sights.

Public Land in Washington, D.C., and the Keston Institute at the University of Southern California.

San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders, who will release the study today, wants to see a public debate about what the city should do now, a spokesman said.

The report lists \$238 million in fix-it projects that mostly have no funding. Some are major – \$51.3 million to retrofit buildings along the Prado for earthquake safety – while others are more modest, such as \$300,000 for new heating and air conditioning at the San Diego Museum of Art.

That list may be too ambitious. A 2006 Park and Recreation Department memo pegged the total at \$102 million.

Whatever the figure, the city's management structure isn't up to the task of dealing with it, the study's authors said.

It's a mistake to split the job of running the park among different city departments, they said: “The complexity of this administrative structure leads to opaque accounting, redundancy and management responsibilities that often overlap or fail to address an issue at all.”

The authors don't think San Diego can generate the money needed to “save” the park, hampered as the city is by a tattered financial reputation, a \$1 billion pension deficit and the virtual inability to sell bonds to raise money.

If San Diego doesn't adopt a new management concept, “it is more probable that the status quo funding situation would continue, or that the level of park support would decline,” the report says.

Park stakeholders seem to agree with report authors that the current system is broken. But there's no consensus yet about which, if any, of the suggested models should be tried.

“I wouldn't use the words 'powder keg,' but I think we're probably heading in that direction, and the longer we wait, the more expensive it gets,” said David Kinney, director of the House of Hospitality Association, which markets the park.

Kinney said he leans toward the private-conservancy model because he wonders how much available money the county and other local governments would have to invest.

“If we can create something people feel comfortable donating to, I think we have a better chance,” he said.

Meanwhile, longtime park-area resident Jay Hyde said he wants to see the city stay in the driver's seat, but just do a better job.

“This is probably one of poorest-run cities in the United States, and I just feel like we need to turn that around,” said Hyde, who helped form a group called Preserve Our Parks to address the zoo's expansion plans. “I think if our city could get its house in order, then the city government could run the park well.”

The issue now passes into the hands of the Balboa Park Committee, a volunteer advisory group whose members are appointed by the mayor. Sanders expects a recommendation in the fall after the committee holds public meetings.

Committee Chairwoman Vicki Granowitz said people shouldn't be upset that the park will pass from public control.

“If we do our job right, the public will have more ability to be involved because, right now, governance of the park is sort of fragmented and not clear,” she said. “I mean, if the public wants to be involved, do they know where to go?”

The report notes that people are generally happy with the park, and that they may not be aware of its problems because of our balmy climate “or the fact that ornate architecture is particularly adept at hiding crumbling plaster.”

The report warns, “Like the famous experiment which showed that frogs will ignore the gradual heating of their water until they suddenly succumb, the deterioration of the park is proceeding despite the lack of a public outcry.”

---

■Jeanette Steele: (619) 293-1030; [jen.steele@uniontrib.com](mailto:jen.steele@uniontrib.com)